QUALITY CRITERIA AS A POWERFUL TOOL FOR TRAINING, AWARENESS RAISING AND EVALUATION – ILUSTRATIONS THROUGH CONTRASTED USES -

Marianne POUMAY, University of Liège.

1. Introduction

In Europe, one of the current challenges is to reach a critical mass of quality Open and Distance Learning (ODL) courses, in order to allow for dissemination of best practices in local languages. After having proposed a definition of what we mean by quality in ODL, this paper presents three projects making use of a set of 100 quality criteria developed by LabSET. It then advocates for a wider use of such quality sets at a European level, allowing for contrasted uses and leading to a quality enhancement of the existing offer, but also to a better dialogue and understanding amongst the educational community.

2. A quality grid

In 2000, LabSET-ULg (Belgium) has developed a quality grid comprising about 100 criteria addressing the five phases of development of a distance course. The grid, continuously used and improved by the team across all the LabSET projects, allows for transparency in what we call "quality". As it appears by browsing through the criteria, our definition of "quality courses" is the following:

"Quality Courses ground their objectives on learners' well analysed needs ; they include motivational (affective) components as well as cognitive ones, they use methods chosen on the basis of sound and explicit theories, they assess learning achievements and processes by relevant and ecologically valid processes and tools giving rise to meaningful and diagnostic indices …and they enable a large majority of the learners to fulfil the learning goals at a high level of mastery." (Poumay, 2003)

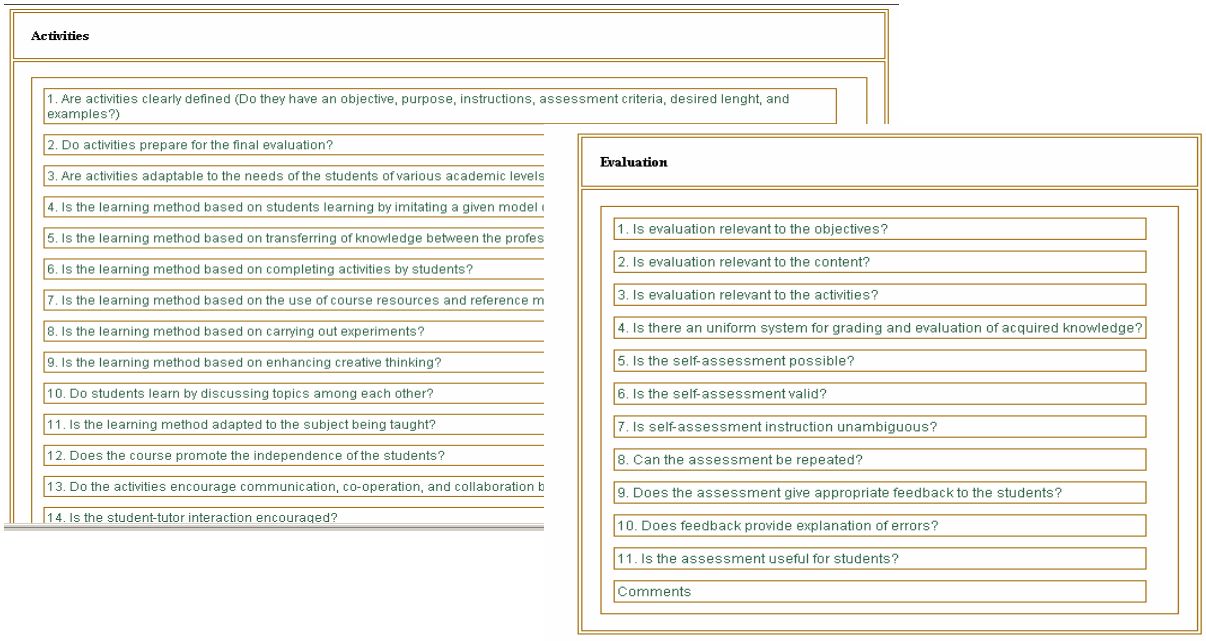
Corresponding to this definition, the quality criteria are split into three categories, themselves divided into sub-categories. We give hereafter a flavour of the instrument by just mentioning some titles, stressing the importance of the activity (in a constructivist sense) of the course user:

? Pedagogical evaluation: objectives (clearly stated, in coherence with activities and evaluation, of specified taxonomy levels, diversified in those levels,…), pre-requisites (announced, tested), credibility, validity and maintenance of the site (identified responsible persons), target public (specified, analysed in terms of needs), contents (valid, consistent, exact, comprehensible, well organised), pedagogical activities (described, instrumented, of different taxonomical levels, functional, allowing for tracking, in accordance with the evaluation, corresponding to varied learning paradigms, allowing for interactions,…), evaluation (with customisable feed-backs, formative, repeated, in coherence with objectives and activities, allowing for different paths, …), interactivity (varied levels, with possible individualisation and personalisation,…) ;

? Technical evaluation: evaluation of the site (error robustness, …), of the navigation, of graphical design and of the use of multimedia.

? Evaluation of the use of the product: conditions of use, existence of a user guide or manual, of an on-line help menu, specification of roles and functions, views on the results per student, per activity, per group, per question, etc.

The 100 criteria, although used by partners and professionals, are complemented by a user guide and illustrated, for each of them, by best practice examples to make sure there is a common understanding of the concepts. The following screens, from the EMDEL project, detail some of the criteria.



We illustrate hereafter three contrasted uses of the grid by explaining precisely the activities, driven by the grid, that we conduct in three of our running projects.

3. Contrasted uses of the quality grid in three running projects

3.1. In an annual competitive call: the FORMADIS initiative (Supported by the European Social Fund and the Belgian Ministries of Education and Professional Training)

In 1998, the Walloon Region of Belgium asked LabSET to conduct a study advising the stakeholders on the choices and steps to be made towards a Walloon Virtual Campus. Following this study, a competitive call was launched in 2001 to select 13 projects to be closely coached and to be turned into on-line active courses. Training is provided half at a distance, both in technology and in pedagogy (minimum of 160 course hours). Building on the success of this first call, a second one was launched in March 2002. It selected 10 new projects that are currently closely coached on the same model, and consequently produce a second set of quality courses. A third call will be launched in April 2003.

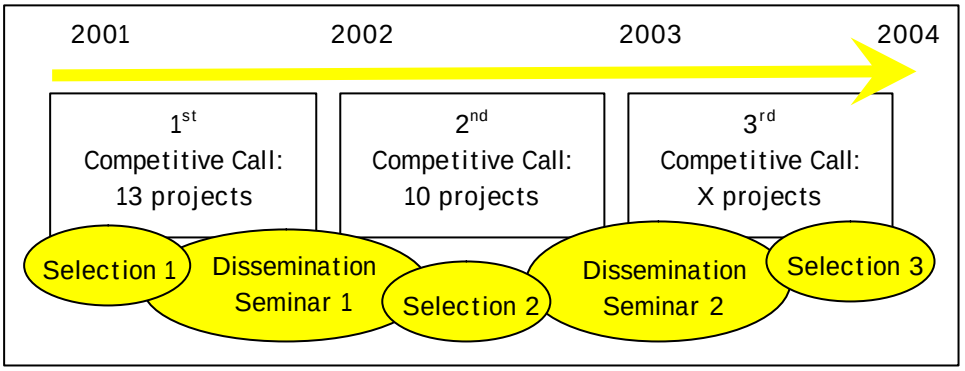


Figure 1: FORMADIS annual competitive calls, for a massive production of quality ODL

After each session, open seminars contribute to the dissemination of "best practices" in ODL through demonstrations of the achieved products, through discussions on their uses and on the added value perceived by their actors (trainers as well as users) and through critical thinking in order to continuously improve the process.

In FORMADIS, the quality criteria are used at different stages:

- For the selection of the candidate organisations, on the basis of the project they submit to the evaluators: five evaluators select in the grid a set of about 15 criteria, used as minimal indicators of the success of the process of ODL design and implementation.
- With the selected candidates, during the pedagogical courses: the LabSET team works with the participants on the quality of their own distance course, criteria per criteria.
- On a regular but optional basis: the grid is used as a self-questioning tool, allowing for continuing improvement of the developed courses.
- Just before the experimentation phase: each participant (professor) has the possibility to compare his/her self-evaluation with an external advice from two LabSET members before testing the course on real students.
- During experimentation: the grid is customised according to the activities of each tested course. It is then used as a dynamic evaluation tool, questioning the users on their perceptions.

3.2. In a degree in ODL design and development: the FORM@SUP initiative

In parallel to that FORMADIS initiative, the University of Liège launched in September 2002 a postgraduate degree (called FORM@SUP) in Higher Education Staff Development. This degree is coordinated by the LabSET. One of its three orientations is dedicated to ODL design, production and delivery. It aims at the same objectives as the above-mentioned annual competitive call and processes in largely common ways: the production of quality courses in local languages over the Internet. The main difference between the two initiatives is that the postgraduate degree provides less individual support and more on-line courses to the participants than the FORMADIS initiative. The degree is therefore better suited to those professionals who are already familiar with self-learning and more autonomous in project management. This degree also acts as an incentive (due to formal accreditation) as well as recognition for the involvement of the faculty members and external trainers in the continuing improvement of their courses.

As in FORMADIS, the FORMASUP selected projects cover a wide content diversity, the courses concerning different domains.

The quality grid is used the same way than in FORMADIS but in addition, we organise regular sessions in which colleagues as well as some external experts use the grid to react to the projects presentations. That way, the participants can benefit from regular external advice on selected criteria of the grid, depending from the competences of the invited experts. This use has been tested this year. It will be extended in 2004 as it has been considered by the participants as very formative. We noticed it was sometimes easier to automatically take into account advice from external experts or from colleagues not directly concerned by the running project than to accept advice from direct colleagues or from tutor in charge. Having a shared grid allows for continuity, independently from the evaluator.

3.3. In the EMDEL project: European Model for Distance Education and Learning

This European project (LEONARDO program) joins the efforts of 10 countries in the development of an on-line catalogue of distance courses. LabSET is responsible for developing an evaluation "Model": a tool allowing to inform the database user on the quality of the available courses and a methodology of international evaluation of the courses. A quality questionnaire is filled in by a national expert, a "customer satisfaction" questionnaire is filled in by every user of the course. In EMDEL, the whole products of the 'On line Catalogue' will be submitted to a quality certification according to the 'Model' adopted.

We notice here a very professional use of the quality grid, where the criteria are transparent and visible by every user but where the grid is only filled in by international accredited experts. This kind of use is likely to be more and more common at a European scale, as an answer to the extending but sometimes very poor ODL offer. Having to choose between several courses aiming at the same objectives, the European citizen will find in quality evaluations a way to maximize his/her efforts and going for the best offer, best meaning here the most effective in pedagogical terms. The EMDEL partners hope that this decision of providing citizens with an evaluation of the pedagogical quality of the offer will increase the global quality of that offer. The service providers will be pushed towards quality and the public awareness will raise, the criteria being well known and announced. Note that a course does not receive a final "quality note" as a result for its evaluation, but a series of written comments for each section of the grid, qualitatively underlining the strengths and weaknesses of the course. For each comment and to better understand them, the user can access the filled in grid.

Contrarily to the ones described upper, this last use of quality criteria is still under fine-tuning. The web site exists, together with the evaluation grid, it has been tested but it is now in the phase of extension of the use to a wider set of evaluators, from the 10 partners countries. The opening of the site to public access is planned for mid-2003.

4. Conclusion – towards the improvement of quality grids and practices

In these three projects, although the quality grid is used very differently, it has the same consequence of raising awareness on the meaning of quality for a distance course, therefore improving the quality of the developed courses. It allows for a better understanding between professionals, sharing ideas on pedagogical values. The concept of quality itself has evolved, following those reflections amongst professionals. FORMADIS, FORMASUP and EMDEL help the grid improve, by reacting to its use, adding criteria or refining others. Partners from different countries also have cultural differences affecting the adaptation of the grid. They underline their preferences and foresee slightly different uses in the different countries.

As FORMADIS does it in Wallonia (Belgium) and FORMASUP in the academic sector, the EMDEL project will allow for a wider dissemination of the grid, collecting additional feed-backs from professionals, towards an improvement of European ODL practices.

5. References

Poumay, M. (2003), Keys to Promote Good Practices in ODL by a TECCC Approach (Training Embedded Coached Course Construction). *Educational Media International*, 40.

Poumay, M., Leclercq, D. & Demily, F. (2000). Quality in web activities through case studies over an integrated platform. In E. Wagner & A. Szucs (Eds), *Research and innovation in Open and Distance learning*, EDEN Research Workshop. Praga, 276-279.

Leclercq, D.(Ed.) (1998). *Pour une Pédagogie Universitaire de Qualité*. Sprimont: Mardaga.

Author:

Marianne Poumay, Director of LabSET-Ulg
University of Liège, Support Lab for Telematic Learning (LabSET)
Bvd de Colonster, 2, B9
B-4000 Liège
m.poumay@ulg.ac.be